

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

Being the History of Three Months in the Life of an English Gentleman.

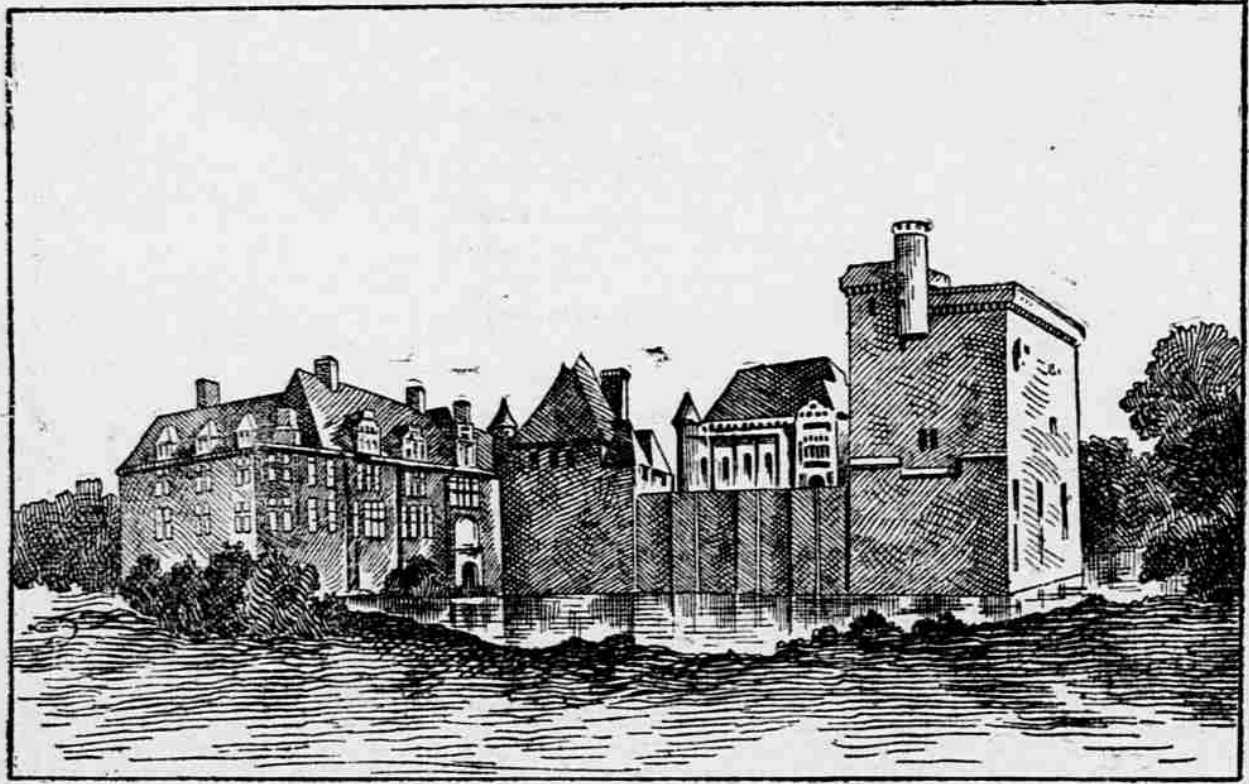
BY ANTHONY HOPE.

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III.—Continued.

For an instant we stood motionless, looking at one another. Then I heard my head again and bowed respectfully. The King found his voice, and asked in bewilderment: "Colonel—Fritz—who is this gentleman?" "Colonel—Fritz—who is this gentleman?" I was about to answer when Col. Sapt stepped between the King and me, and began to talk to his Majesty in a low growl. The King towered over Sapt, and as he listened his eyes now and again sought mine. I looked at him anxiously, and the likeness was certainly astonishing, though I saw the points of difference also. The King's face was slightly more fleshy than mine, the oval of his contour the least trifle more pronounced, and as I fancied, his mouth lacked something of the firmness (or obstinacy) which was to be gathered from my close-shutting lips. But for all that, and above all minor distinctions, the likeness rose striking, salient, wonderful.

Sapt ceased speaking, and the King still frowned. Then, gradually, the corners of his mouth began to twitch, his nose came down (as mine does when I laugh), his eyes twinkled, and, behold! he burst into the merriest fit of irrepressible laughter, which rang through the woods and proclaimed him a jovial soul.



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THE CASTLE OF ZENDA.

"Well met, cousin!" he cried, stepping up to me, clapping me on the back, and laughing still. "You must forgive me if I was taken aback. A man doesn't expect to see double at this time of day, eh, Fritz?" "I must pardon, sire, for my presumption," said I. "I trust it will not forfeit your Majesty's favor." "By Heaven! you'll always enjoy the King's countenance," he laughed, "whether I like it or not, and I shall very gladly add to it what services I can. Where are you traveling to?" "To Streisau, sire—to the coronation." The King looked at his friends; he still smiled, though his expression hinted some uneasiness. But the humorous side of the matter caught him again. "Fritz, Fritz!" he cried, "a thousand crowns for a sight of brother Michael's face when he sees a pair of us!" and the merry laugh rang out again.

"Seriously," observed Fritz von Tarlenheim, "I question Mr. Rassendyll's wisdom in visiting Streisau just now." "Well, Sapt?" said he, questioning. "Well, Sapt?" growled the old fellow. "Come, Colonel, you mean that I should be in Mr. Rassendyll's stead?" "Oh, ay, wrap it up in the right way," said Sapt, hauling a great pipe out of his pocket. "Enough, sire," said I. "I'll leave Ruritania to-day." "Now, by thunder, you shan't—and that's sans phrase, as Sapt likes it. For you shall dine with me to-night, happen what will afterward. Come, man, you don't meet a new relation every day."

"We dine sparingly to-night," said Fritz von Tarlenheim. "Not we—with our new cousin for a guest!" cried the King, and as Fritz shrugged his shoulders, he added: "Oh, I'll remember our early start, Fritz." "So will I—to-morrow morning," said old Sapt, pulling at his pipe. "Oh, wise old Sapt!" cried the King, "home, Mr. Rassendyll—by the way, what name did he give you?" "Your Majesty's," I answered, bowing.

"Well, that shows they weren't ashamed of us," he laughed. "Come, then, Cousin Rudolf. I've got no house of my own here, but I'll have brother Michael lend us a place of his, and we'll make shift to entertain you there; and he put his arm through mine, and signing to the others to accompany us, walked me off, westerly, through the forest. We walked for more than half an hour, and the King smoked cigars and chattered incessantly. He was full of interest in my family, laughed heartily when I told him of the portraits with Elphberg hair in our galleries, and yet more heartily when he heard that my expedition to Ruritania was a secret one. "You have to visit your disreputable cousin on the sly, have you?" said he, suddenly emerging from the woods, we came on a small and rude shooting lodge. It was a one-story building, a sort of bungalow, built entirely of wood. As we approached it a little maid in a plain livery came out to meet us. The only other person I saw about the place was a fat elderly woman, whom I afterward discovered to be the mother of Johann, the Duke's keeper. "Well, is dinner ready, Josef?" asked the King.

The little servant informed us that it was, and we soon sat down to a plentiful meal. The fare was plain enough; the King ate heartily, Fritz von Tarlenheim delicately, and Sapt voraciously. I played a good knife and fork, as my custom is; the King noticed my performance with approval. "We're all good trenchermen, we Elphbergs," said he. "But what are we eating dry? Wine, Josef! wine, man! Are we beasts to eat without drinking? Are we cattle, Josef?" At this reproach Josef hastened to load the table with bottles.

"Remember to-morrow!" said Fritz. "Ay—to-morrow!" said old Sapt. The King drained a bumper to his "Cousin Rudolf," as he was gracious or merry enough to call me; and I

drank its fellow to the "Elphberg red," whereat he laughed loudly. "Now, be the meat what it might, the wine we drank was beyond all price of praise, and we did it justice. Fritz ventured once to stay the King's hand. "What?" cried the King. "Remember, you start before I do, Master Fritz; you must be more sparing by two hours than I."

Fritz said that I did not understand. "The Colonel and I," he explained, "leave here at 6; we ride down to Zenda and return with the guard of honor to fetch the King at 8, and then we all ride together to the station." "Hang that same guard!" growled Sapt. "Oh, it's very civil of my brother to ask the honor for his regiment," said the King. "Come, cousin, you need not start early. Another bottle, man!" I had another bottle—or, rather, a part of one, for the larger half traveled quickly down his Majesty's throat. Fritz gave up his attempts at persuasion; from persuading he fell to being persuaded, and soon we were all of us as full of wine as we had any right to be. The King began talking of what he would do in the future, old Sapt of what he had done in the past, Fritz of some beautiful girl or other, and I of the wonderful merits of the Elphberg dynasty. We all talked at once, and fol-

lowed to the letter Sapt's exhortation to let the morrow take care of itself. At last the King set down his glass and leaned back in his chair. "I have drunk enough," said he. "Far be it from me to contradict the King," said I. Indeed, his remark was most absolutely true—so far as it went. While I yet spoke Josef came and set before the King a marvelous old wicker-covered flagon. It had lain so long in some darkened cellar that it seemed to blink in the candlelight. His Highness the Duke of Streisau bade me set this wine before the King when the King was weary of all other wines, and pray the King to drink for the love that he bears his brother."

"Well done, Black Michael!" said the King. "Out with the cork, Josef, hang him! Did he think I'd flinch from his bottle?" The bottle was opened, and Josef filled the King's glass. Then, with a solemnity born of the hour and his own condition, he looked round on us. "Gentlemen, my friends—Rudolf, my cousin (it's a scandalous story, Rudolf, on my honor!)—everything is yours, to that—say knave, my brother, Black Michael."

And the King seized the bottle and turned it over his mouth, and drained it and flung it from him, and laid his head on his arms on the table. And we drank pleasant dreams to his Majesty—and that is all I remember of the evening. Perhaps it is enough.

IV. **The King Keeps His Appointment.** Whether I had slept a minute or a year I knew not. I awoke with a start and a shiver; my face, hair and clothes dripped water, and opposite me stood old Sapt, a sneering smile on his face and an empty bucket in his hand. On the table by him sat Fritz von Tarlenheim, pale as a ghost and black as a crow under the eyes. I leaped to my feet in anger. "Your joke goes too far, sire!" I cried. "I will have no time for this to-day. Nothing else would rouse you. It's 5 o'clock." "I'll thank you, Col. Sapt—" I began again, but in spirit, though I was uncommonly cold in body. "Rassendyll!" interrupted Fritz, getting down from the table and taking my arm. "Look here."

The King lay full length on the floor. His face was as red as his hair, and he breathed heavily. Sapt, the disreputable old dog, kicked him sharply. He did not stir, nor was there any break in his breathing. I saw that his face and head were wet with water, as were mine. "We've spent half an hour on him," said Fritz. "He drank three times what either of you did," growled Sapt. "I knelt down and felt his pulse. It was alarmingly languid and slow. We three looked at one another. "Was it drugged—that last bottle?" I asked in a whisper. "I don't know," said Sapt. "There's none within 10 miles, and 1,000 doctors wouldn't take him to Streisau to-day. I know the look of it. He'll not move for six or seven hours yet."

"But the coronation!" I cried in horror. Fritz shrugged his shoulders, as I began to see as his habit on most occasions. "We must send word that he's ill," he said. "I suppose so," said I. Old Sapt, who seemed as fresh as a fawn, had lit his pipe and was puffing hard at it. "If he's not crowned to-day," said he, "I'll lay a crown he's never crowned."

"But, heavens, why?" "The whole Nation's there to meet him; half the army—aye, and Black Michael at the head. Shall we send word that the King's drunk?" "That he's ill," said I in correction. "Ill!" echoed Sapt, with a scornful

laugh. "They know his illnesses too well. He's been ill before!" "Well, we must chance what they think," said Fritz helplessly. "I'll carry the news and make the best of it." Sapt raised his hand. "Tell me," said he, "do you think the King was drugged?" "I do," said I. "And who drugged him?" "That damned hound, Black Michael," said Fritz between his teeth. "Ay," said Sapt, "that he might not come to be crowned. Rassendyll here doesn't know our pretty Michael. What think you, Fritz—has Michael no King ready? Has half Streisau no other candidate? As God's alive, man, the throne's lost if the King shows himself not in Streisau to-day. I know Black Michael."

"We could carry him there," said I. "And a very pretty picture he makes," sneered Sapt. Fritz von Tarlenheim buried his face in his hands. The King breathed loudly and heavily. Sapt stirred him again with his foot. "The drunken dog!" he said. "But he's an Elphberg and the son of his father, and may I rot in hell before Black Michael sits in his place!"

For a moment or two we were all silent; then Sapt, knitting his bushy gray brows, took his pipe from his mouth and said to me: "As a man grows old he believes in Fate. Fate sent you here. Fate sends you now to Streisau."

I staggered back, murmuring, "Good God!" Fritz looked up with an eager, bewildered gaze. "Impossible!" I murmured. "I should be known."

"It's a risk—against a certainty," said Sapt. "If you leave I'll wager you'll not be known. Are you afraid?" "Come, lad, there, there; but it's your life, you know. If you're here, you're here. But if you don't go, you go to Streisau. Black Michael will sit to-night on the throne, and the King lie in prison or his grave."

"Is all safe here?" "Nothing's safe anywhere," said Sapt, "but we can make it no safer." Fritz von Tarlenheim, in the uniform of a Captain in the same regiment as that to which my dress belonged. In four minutes Sapt had arrayed himself in his uniform, and the three horses were ready. We jumped on their backs and started at a rapid trot. The game had begun. What would the issue of it be?

The cool morning air cleared my head, and I was able to take in all Sapt said to me. He was wonderful. Fritz von Tarlenheim, riding like a man asleep, but Sapt, without another word for the King, began at once to instruct me most minutely in the history of my past life, of my family, of my tastes, pursuits, weaknesses, friends, companions and servants. He told me the etiquette of the Ruritania court, promising to be constantly at my elbow to point out everybody whom I ought to know, and give me hints with what degree of favor to greet them.

"By the way," he said, "you are a Catholic, are you not?" "Not I," I answered. "Lord, he's a heretic!" growled Sapt, and forthwith he fell to a rudimentary lesson in the practices and observances of the Ruritania court. "Luckily," said he, "you won't be expected to know much, for the King's notoriously lax and careless about such matters. But you must be as civil as butter to the Cardinal. We hope to win him over, because he and Michael have a standing quarrel about their predeceased father."

We were by now at the station. Fritz had recovered nerve enough to explain to the astonished station master that the King had changed his plans. The train started, and we got into a first-class carriage, and Sapt, leaning back on the cushions, went on with his lesson. I looked at my watch—the King's watch—and found it was 10.15. "I wonder if they've gone to look for us," I said. "I hope they won't find the King," said Sapt. "The King's not here, and the train is here. The train traveled well, and at 9.30, looking out of the window, I saw the towers and spires of a great city. "Your capital, sire," cried old Sapt, with a wave of his hand, and leaning forward, he laid his finger on my pulse. "A little too quick," said he in a grimace. "I'm not made of stone!" I exclaimed.

"You'll do," said he, with a nod. "We must say Fritz here has caught the age. Drain your flask, Fritz, for Heaven's sake, boy!" Fritz did as he was bid. "We're an hour early," said Sapt. "We send word to your Majesty that the King's arrival, for there'll be no one here to meet us yet. And meanwhile—" "Meanwhile," said I, "the King'll be hanged if he doesn't have some breakfast!" Old Sapt chuckled, and held out his hand. "You're an Elphberg, every inch of you," said he. "Then he pushed me, looking at us, said quietly, "God send we may be alive to-night!"

"Amen!" said Fritz von Tarlenheim. The train stopped, and Sapt and I leaped out, unopened, and held the door for me. I choked down a lump that rose in my throat, settled my helmet firmly on my head, and (I'm not ashamed to say) I knelt and prayed to God. Then I stepped on the platform of the station at Streisau. A moment later all was bustle and confusion; men hurrying up and down, and hurrying off again; men conducting me to the buffet; men mounting and riding in hot haste to the quarters of the troops, to the cathedral, to the residence of Duke Michael, and so on, swallowed the last drop of my cup of coffee the bells throughout all the city broke out into a joyful peal, and men cheering me upon my ear. King Rudolf the Fifth was in his good city of Streisau. And they shouted outside: "God save the King!"

Old Sapt's mouth wrinkled into a smile. "God save 'em both!" he whispered. "Courage, lad!" and I felt his hand press my knee. **V. The Adventures of an Understudy.** With Fritz von Tarlenheim and Col. Sapt close behind me I stepped out of the train, and I felt as if I were a thing I did was to feel if my revolver were handy and my sword loose in the scabbard. A gay group of officers and high dignitaries, some on horseback, some on foot, were waiting for me. They were the yellow and red ribbon of the Red Rose of Ruritania—which, by the way, I decorated my unworthy breast as I rode to the frontier.

I took it all in a second, and nodded my head. "There's a chance," said Fritz, with his first sign of hopefulness. "If I escape detection," said I. "We're detected," said Sapt. "I'll send Black Michael down below here, and go myself, so help me Heaven! Sit in that chair, man." I obeyed him. "He dashed from the room, calling, 'Josef, Josef!' In three minutes I was back, and Josef with him. The latter carried a jug of hot water, soap and razors. He was trembling as Sapt told him how the land lay, and bade him shave me. Suddenly Fritz smote on his thigh: "But the guard! They'll know they'll know!"

"Pooh! He shan't wait for the guard. We'll ride to Hofban and catch a train there. When they come the bird'll be flown." "But the King?" "The King will be in the wine cellar. I'm going to carry him there now." They find him?" "They won't. How should they? Josef will put them off."

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It was 6 o'clock now, and we had no time to lose. Sapt hurried me into the King's room, and I dressed myself in the uniform of a Colonel of the Guard, finding time, as I slipped on the King's boots, to ask Sapt what he had done with the old woman.

"She swore she'd heard nothing," said he; "but to make sure I tied her legs with the King's boots, and she was bound and bound her hands, and locked her up in the coal cellar, next door to the King. Josef'll look after them both, later on."

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logged in my horse's mane, and I took it and stuck it in my coat. The Marshal smiled grimly. I had stolen Fritz von Tarlenheim's face, but he was too impassive to show me whether his sympathies were with me or not. "The red rose for the Elphbergs," Marshal said I easily, and he nodded. "I have written 'Fritz' on a strange word it must seem. But the truth is that I was drunk with excitement. Alas!—that I was in very truth the King; and, with a look of laughing triumph, I raised my eyes to the beautiful balconies again. . . . and moved, and she leaned forward and gazed at me. And I, collecting myself, met her eyes full and square, while my hand felt my revolver. Suppose she had cried aloud 'Fritz' not the King?"

Well, we went by; and then the Marshal, turning round in his saddle, with his hand, and the Cuirassiers closed round us. The crowd could not be so near me. And I, collecting myself, met her eyes full and square, while my hand felt my revolver. Suppose she had cried aloud 'Fritz' not the King?"

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